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March 22, 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR:

THE PRESIDENT HAS SEEN...
THE PRESIDENT

FROM:

HENRY A. KISSINGER HK

SUBJECT:

Implications of the Laos Operation
for South and North Vietnam and
for the U.S.

ARMY review completed.

This memorandum estimates the implications of the Lam Son operation for South Vietnam, North Vietnam, and the United States.

The following represents our current judgments, which are necessarily preliminary.

Implications for South Vietnam. The implications for South Vietnam will be mixed, with some potential military benefits and some potential political disturbances.

-- The amount of munitions destroyed and delayed in the operation will seriously crimp enemy plans this dry season and perhaps over the entire year. Hanoi's capacity to interfere in the South Vietnamese elections, except through sporadic showpiece efforts, will be very sharply limited.

-- The effects of the operation on Hanoi's military plans will be particularly severe because of the loss of other Communist sources of supply in the south and the loss of the Cambodian sanctuaries. Hanoi would have to send about one and a half times as many supplies through the pipeline this year than last just to keep even. As a result of this operation, it is now virtually certain that Hanoi cannot even match last year's total. General Abrams reported this morning a 75 percent reduction in throughput of supplies to Cambodia and South Vietnam when compared to last year's estimate. We are already getting reports of severe Communist supply shortages in Military Regions 3 and 4 to the South.

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Attached to Hender to HAK 25 May 1971

-- We know that a number of enemy units have been very badly hurt, and have suffered heavy casualties. Those units would probably have been used against I Corps within the next few months, which cannot now be done. Thus, on balance, even though the ARVN has also suffered heavy casualties, our judgment is that the North Vietnamese cannot follow up in time to take advantage of it. It appears that the casualty figures against North Vietnamese forces may have in fact been greater than we have heard. We conducted over 500 B-52 raids; we attained damage assessments on only 10 percent of these. In virtually every case, the assessments showed the raids had been massively effective in destroying staging areas and achieving casualties. Thus North Vietnamese losses may range much higher above 10,000 than we now believe.

-- It is also clear that the North Vietnamese, like the South Vietnamese, were taking losses in their elite units rather than the lower rated units.

-- We cannot yet tell whether the pace of Vietnamization would have to be slowed, but right now I doubt it. In any case, we will want to review the ARVN performance carefully in order to see what changes, if any, we should make in our Vietnamization program.

-- Thieu may be hurt politically for having launched a venture which was not a full success. This could make him vulnerable in the upcoming election. Minh and (particularly) Ky appear to be maneuvering to profit from this.

-- Thieu may be less willing than before to proclaim a new political initiative, since he will not be leading from unquestionable strength.

North Vietnam. In Hanoi the reactions will probably also be mixed, with some relief that the operation ended as it did but some concern over what it demonstrates about South Vietnamese readiness to carry the battle into vital areas.

-- It is clear that Hanoi, from the moment that the battle began, was intensely alert to all its implications and treated it as an engagement of the utmost importance. In fact, the North Vietnamese concentrated more of their resources and showed a higher readiness to sacrifice lives and material than the South Vietnamese.

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-- Given the Politburo's predilection to continue on its chosen course, it is probable that Hanoi will now be reluctant to make any new negotiating proposals until the end of this year or at least until all the political results of the operation are in.

-- But Hanoi's ultimate attitude must be tempered with concern about the number of men it has lost. Hanoi also knows the real cost of the operation to them and cannot key its future plans solely on U.S. press reporting.

-- Moreover, Hanoi's capacity to inflict significant military damage in South Vietnam has been severely reduced. And Hanoi will probably have to be prepared for further South Vietnamese incursions. ARVN operations in Cambodia have shown that the South Vietnamese are prepared to come back into enemy supply and base areas again and again.

-- Hanoi may be forced to try to keep the supply trails open as long as possible and perhaps even during the rainy season, which would be a costly and not very remunerative operation.

-- It is also possible that Hanoi's relations with China were strained as a consequence of this operation. Although the Chinese came in with a number of helpful words and gestures, there are indications that Peking's performance fell short of Hanoi's fondest hopes for binding Peking commitments.

-- Something we should bear in mind, although it does not relate directly to the consequences of the operation, is the reluctance the North Vietnamese have shown about crossing the DMZ in force, even though they may have been tempted at times. This probably reflects Hanoi's fears that we are just looking for an excuse to resume bombing. It may also reflect its concern that the ARNV, and perhaps we, might have followed retreating NVA units right into North Vietnam.

The United States. Here, particularly because of the very one-sided press treatment of the operation, the consequences of the operation were probably most adverse. Laos has again brought the war to the front pages, in a way which shows that no early and easy end is in sight. Opponents of Vietnamization will probably be encouraged to push harder for a unilateral U.S. withdrawal. However, these problems may be overcome over time if it can be shown that, as a result of this operation, our casualties have declined even lower and that the rate of enemy attacks has been materially affected.

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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

INFORMATION

March 21, 1971

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MEMORANDUM FOR:

THE PRESIDENT

FROM:

HENRY A. KISSINGER *IK*

SUBJECT:

Laotian Operation

THE PRESIDENT HAS SEEN... *A*

In response to my telephone request last evening for an assessment of the ARVN morale situation, Ambassador Bunker has made the attached report. (Tab A) He makes the following significant points about the general situation and ARVN morale:

-- Withdrawal of ARVN units is being carried out as planned in an orderly manner. There is no semblance of defeat or rout.

-- Many of the remaining units in Laos are in heavy contact with the enemy but are inflicting heavy losses on the enemy and are suffering relatively light losses themselves. The origin of reports of panic may have been from a soldier of the 4th Battalion, 1st ARVN Division which had been under extremely heavy pressure for several days. Due to casualties, the unit was practically leaderless and was finally extracted with only 80 survivors. Such an experience could affect the morale of a unit in any Army.

-- General Weyand has observed that because most of the killing is done by artillery and TACAIR, the infantry man who is under continual fire, does not see the results of his own efforts. Consequently, it can be difficult for him to judge the immediate course of the action. The same is true for helicopter pilots who only see a small piece of the action.

-- There apparently have been exceptional cases involving individuals who have experienced the toughest kind of fighting giving expression of sagging morale to the press.

-- There have been differences of quality of performance of various ARVN units. The 1st Division has turned in an exceptional performance and its morale is high. The marines have performed well. Performance of individual airborne units has varied.

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-- It is planned today to withdraw the headquarters and the 2nd and 4th Battalions of the 2nd Regiment. With these movements, all ARVN units will be east of Route 92.

Ambassador Bunker indicates that General Abrams will be sending another report on his assessment of the impact of the Laotian operation. Ambassador Bunker states that he has no reason to change the judgment he expressed in his previous message that the operation has achieved most of what we had hoped for.

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[TS-HK 684C]

FROM: AMBASSADOR BUNKER, SAIGON
TO: THE WHITE HOUSE, HENRY A. KISSINGER
SUBJECT: Your Telephone Call of March 21

1. I have had General Weyand make as quick and thorough check as possible of morale situation in ARVN. He has talked with General Sutherland who has in turn checked with U.S. advisors, and the following is a summary of these reports:

a) Withdrawal of ARVN units is being carried out as planned in an orderly manner.

b) Many of the units are engaged in heavy contact with the enemy. Yesterday the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th battalions of the 2nd ARVN Infantry Regiment inflicted heavy losses on the enemy while suffering relatively light losses themselves. The 1st, 2nd, 6th, 8th, 9th ARVN Airborne Battalions all had heavy contact with the enemy, again inflicting heavy losses while suffering relatively light losses themselves.

c) It is planned to withdraw today the headquarters and the 2nd and 4th Battalions of the 2nd Regiment. When these withdrawals are completed, all ARVN units will be east of Route 92.

d) Morale: The only clue we can get to origin of reports of panic is reported statement to a Vietnamese correspondent by a soldier of the

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of the 4th Battalion of the 1st ARVN Division which had been under extremely heavy pressure for several days. Its outstanding commander and the executive officer were killed. The unit was practically leaderless, became lost and was finally extracted with only 80 survivors. An experience of this kind could effect the morale of a unit in any army. On the other hand, the 2nd Battalion of the 3rd Regiment was extracted with only 110 effectives, but with high morale.

2. As General Weyand says, in an operation of this kind, in terrain of the nature of the Lam Son area, the infantryman is under almost continual fire. Unlike conventional warfare, most killing is done by artillery and tacair and he does not see the result of his own efforts. Consequently, it can be difficult for him to judge the immediate course of the action. Helicopter pilots, many of whom who have been interviewed by the press, also only see a small piece of the action. This particular problem is being given command attention.

3. In conclusion, I think it is fair to say that there have been exceptional cases involving individual units or individuals who have experienced the toughest kind of fighting whose morale has been affected and may well have given expression of this to the press. The same holds true for individual helicopter pilots. It is true also that there have been differences

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in the quality of performance of various ARVN units. The 1st Division has turned in an exceptional performance and its morale is high. Some of the airborne units have done well, others not so well. The Marines have performed well. Based on all the reports which I have had, it is fair to say that the withdrawal is being carried out according to plan and in an orderly manner. There is no semblance of defeat or rout.

4. General Abrams will be sending in later today a report on how we presently see the impact of Lam Son 719 operations. I have no reason to change the judgment expressed in my last message.

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March 22, 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR:

THE PRESIDENT

FROM:

HENRY A. KISSINGER

SUBJECT:

Assessment by General Abrams

Attached at Tab A is a message from General Abrams assessing the effects of the Laotian and Cambodian operations. The following are excerpts from key paragraphs which comment on progress in Vietnamization, impact on U.S. forces, collateral benefits, effect on enemy capabilities and effect on enemy logistics of the Laos operation. (The full text of these paragraphs is indicated at the tabs.)

Progress in Vietnamization

-- The operation has been a significant test. The South Vietnamese operated without U.S. advisors, without the reassuring presence of adjacent U.S. units which could render assistance if needed, and they did so concurrently with a major operation in Cambodia in addition to continuing operations in their own country.

-- The South Vietnamese have mounted a complex multi-division operation in conditions of difficult unfamiliar terrain, adverse weather and against a well prepared and determined foe.

-- RVNAF forces acquitted themselves well militarily, achieved the objectives they set for themselves and did so in the face of the most determined opposition.

-- Success has not been without cost. Some units will require a period of refitting before becoming fully combat effective again and there are indications of reduced morale and self-confidence on the part of some units which suffered heavy losses without achieving significant results.

-- Highly encouraging, however, and a strong indication of continuing progress toward the goal of Vietnamization is the planning currently being accomplished toward further operations in Laos as a continuation of Lam Son 719.

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